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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Reading the Map

Bob Nardini

YBP Library Services, rnardini@YBP.com

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owed it to **MINITEX** to give my honest opinion. I found it very interesting that both **Don** and **Greg** had apparently made the same decision as they both mentioned minor problems with their respective companies' products.

The group dynamics were interesting. I had not known what to expect in terms of how we would all get along, especially since this was sort of a "dueling vendors" scenario. Between the vendor reps, there was a somewhat stiff cordiality. The librarians quickly hit it off and started comparing notes: "What do you do about this?" "How do you handle that?" "What system do you have?" We talked about past job experiences and I found someone (**Don**) who has changed jobs even more often than I have. We quickly established a rapport and camaraderie, and even though we were doing our best to represent our respective companies, we were not in direct competition with each other, not like the vendors were. Also, I think the fact that librarians are infinitely curious about other libraries and love to share information won out.

The issue of librarians crossing over to the vendor's side was also the topic for a session at the **NASIG** meeting in June; the session was packed, so obviously this is something librarians think about. Another issue is conflict of interest. My library director, **Tom Henderson**, was very supportive of letting me "go on the road," but cautioned me about being a "mouthpiece" for **Serials Solutions**. I justify it in that **MINITEX** wanted me there as a client to give my honest opinion, and they paid my expenses. I have been contacted many times as a reference for **Serials Solutions** because librarians have seen my name on previous articles in **ATG** or on **SERIALST**. All I can say is, I try to be careful. I think we all have our favorite services/vendors, and we're happy to share information about them — again, part of our inquisitiveness. Due to the proliferation of email and listservs, it's very easy to put out a request for information, or to contact someone you see mentioned. The practical side of it is that we don't want to waste our time and money on a service that isn't very good, so we want information; and who better to ask than an existing client?

I now have a new appreciation for what vendors do, especially the ones who travel and have to give presentations over and over. I enjoyed talking about **Serials Solutions** and felt honored to be representing them, but it was some work. This one little weekend trip was exhausting, not only from the traveling (I won't get into what happened to my flights up there) but from the stress of giving my presentation. So the next time a company rep travels to visit you, pour 'em a strong cup of coffee, because odds are they need it. 

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Reading the Map

by **Bob Nardini** (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774x3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <rnardini@YBP.com>

Column Editor's Note: This column is based on an "interview" with Peter Briscoe. Last year he wrote a pamphlet excoriating librarians, some librarians anyway, for not reading enough. Peter Briscoe is Associate University Librarian for Collection Development, University of California, Riverside.

BN: Peter, your *Reading the Map of Knowledge: The Art of Being a Librarian* has created a little buzz. I understand that even **Larry McMurtry** has had something to say about it. I have my own copy, and I must say, that I read it several times—all 27 pages—I enjoyed it so well.

PB: Bob, I wrote the pamphlet because I was alarmed by the growing number of aliterate librarians. The term is an oxymoron, but the phenomenon is widespread. It denotes librarians who no longer bother to read...especially books. I find them everywhere, from recent library school graduates to library directors. But the alarm bell went off when I noticed the phenomenon among my own colleagues—collection development officers of research libraries—formerly a highly literate group. When I was a young CDO twenty years ago, I was very impressed by the level of culture of my colleagues, nearly all of them older than I. Dinner table conversation was sparkling. They were well read, well traveled, often knew one or two foreign languages, and loved the arts. A number of them were amateur musicians. It goes without saying that they knew the book trade intimately and enjoyed the company of booksellers. What a change has taken place! Today, at the dinner table, I almost never hear my colleagues discuss exciting books or plays they've seen or even good movies. Instead, they're apt to pass around pictures of their dogs.

The other thing I tried to do in the pamphlet was impart some strategies for discerning quality amidst the overwhelming quantity of a library collection. This is the real art of librarianship—essential for intelligent personal reading, preparing bibliographies, selecting books, and doing advanced reference. As for **Larry McMurtry**, I sent him a copy of the pamphlet because of my admiration for his recent book, **Walter Benjamin at the**

Dairy Queen, which has wonderful essays on reading, book scouting, and bookselling. He read it right away, and shot me back a nice letter saying that he liked it a lot.

BN: I'm not surprised to hear that. You have a clean, elegant style of writing that I'm sure he noticed. Your style, in fact, was almost an argument in itself, in support of your argument about librarianship today; or, at least, an example in support of your argument, showing what one gains, or earns, from a lifetime's worth of reading. You've proven yourself quite a pamphleteer. And in that tradition — speaking of your argument — I'll bet that congratulation and praise is not the only reaction you've seen from your own readers.

PB: I have found that readers either really like the pamphlet or consider it "weird" — nothing in between. There is a gulf forming between librarians. One — from the other side — told me that she is tired of reading, and looks forward to the day when a black box will tell her what a book says. Is that psychosis or science fiction?

BN: I don't imagine your purpose in writing the pamphlet was to get "in between" responses from anyone, so it sounds like you did your job. I'm not sure whether it would be psychosis or science fiction. Maybe both. Or maybe neither. She had a point, in a way. It's certainly possible today to make a good career as a librarian without reading a great many books. And even if you do want to read, it's certainly easy to get discouraged at the always-increasing number of books that you want to read, or ought to read, but will never crack. Not to mention those you'll never even hear of. That black box might come in handy for us all. A new kind of abstracting service. You addressed this question in the pamphlet: How to find the time to read?

PB: I agree with the late **Frances Clarke Sayers** (professor of library service at **UCLA** and author of *Summoned by Books*) that a librarian who doesn't read is fundamentally no good. The problem of quantity, of there being too many books to read, has always been with us. The *Book of Ecclesiastes* registers the first known complaint. And since then things have only gotten worse—a lot worse—which is precisely why the world needs

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librarians! If we become overwhelmed and paralyzed, if we cease selecting good books to read, and finally cease reading ourselves, we are frauds. In my pamphlet, I explore the problem and offer some approaches to deal with it (provided one isn't lazy) including this advice from **Lawrence Clark Powell**: "How does the librarian find time for books? I want you to listen carefully while I give the answer, for it is a precious secret I am about to disclose. One finds time for books by taking it."

BN: One of the ways librarians have been able to deal with the number of books published today, of course, is to have an approval plan. If an approval plan profile is accurate enough — and I know a lot of librarians and vendor reps who work pretty hard at that — that frees time for librarians to deal with other things. Sometimes librarians don't spend much time anymore with the approval books. So approval plans — a way to handle the great quantity of books out there to buy — has distanced some librarians from books. I'm beginning to feel a little guilty.

PB: I only wish librarians felt the same way — a little guilty — for not reviewing the weekly approval plan shipments. Many have decided "why bother?" The flow of books seems good, the coverage seems good, the approval profiles are working. Why not just fly on automatic pilot? After all, we're all very busy. Anybody who thinks this way, of course, should not be working in collection development. A collection development librarian delights in looking at new books. It's the best part of the job, and an indispensable source of knowledge. When a particularly good title appears, it triggers a series of questions: What other books has the author written? Does the library own them? In general, what are our holdings on this subject? Are we lacking any key works? Noticing that the title is a translation, does the library have the original foreign language edition? Noticing that the title is part of a series, what other volumes might be useful? This kind of inquiry leads to real collection development as distinguished from mere book selection. Occasionally one discovers that a part of the collection is in need of an overhaul, and then the fun really begins.

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in the formation of American culture, and feminist scholars have even found evidence of lesbianism in the series. Commenting on this insight, **Benson** said, "This is the silliest, most out-of-the-picture thing I ever heard. I'd like to blow a cork!" **Benson**, who outlived two husbands and is survived by a daughter, worked at the *Toledo Blade* newspaper until the last day of her life, when an ambulance transported her from her desk to the hospital. 🍀

Furthermore, one must monitor approval plans to know what is not coming in. Many small independent publishers despair at how few orders they receive after sending out announcements and advertising to libraries. I am referring to publishers of excellent literary titles, not silly pop stuff. For example, small publishers will risk publishing foreign literature in translation, which is quite appropriate for college and research libraries. Yet sales are dismal. Why? Probably because some inattentive, lazy selector assumes that the title will come in on approval, and so simply trashes the announcement.

BN: Well, I'm once again feeling some guilt, since I will confess that we vendors could do a better job than we sometimes do in covering those small publishers. And yet if we were perfect, and were able to track down everything, the trend you describe, Peter, might just accelerate. Years ago, vendors would promote approval plans as a way to cover the "core" — basically university presses and the major commercial publishers. But librarians asked for more, and sometimes made "more" a condition of keeping or winning their business. So we did cover more and went well beyond anyone's "core," to the point that some librarians may think that we cover about everything on approval. Which we never did and I'm sure never will. Maybe we need to be clearer about that, that approval plans are about covering a certain core of material — wide as that "core" has

grown to be — and that they are not the complete answer to collection development.

PB: Approval plan vendors do a remarkable job of providing a wide, solid core (and beyond) but there will always be off-beat, small, regional, ethnic, independent, and brand new presses that escape the net. For example (and this is only one of a hundred different examples), books on Hispanic genealogy are almost always published by independent researchers, who are very hard to track down. We purchase them from a specialist bookseller, who is constantly scanning for off-beat titles of potential importance to research libraries. Selectors must be able to spot these waifs amidst the mass of publishers' advertising made redundant by approval plans. If they just play the percentages, they will never build truly distinguished collections.

BN: Maybe we could end just where we began, then, Peter. Let's help librarians obtain one particular title of value from a small and independent press. What are the details for buying your *Reading the Map of Knowledge*?

PB: My pleasure, Bob. The full citation is: **Peter Briscoe**, *Reading the Map of Knowledge: The Art of Being a Librarian*. Grand Terrace, CA: Palo Verde Press, 2001. Libraries may order it from their preferred vendor. For individuals, the easiest way to obtain a copy is to send a \$5.00 check payable to Peter Briscoe, 18608 Oak Park Drive, Riverside, CA 92504. 🍀

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Column Editor: **Pamela M. Rose, M.L.S.** (Web Services & Library Promotion Coordinator, University at Buffalo; Phone: 716-829-2408 x129; Fax: 716-829-2211) <pmrose@acsu.buffalo.edu> wings.buffalo.edu/~pmrose

THE GHASTLY GETS MORE SO by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

The tedious and tiresome has become maddening and gruesome. Vast databases vomit up page upon page of text out of the maw of cyberspace anarchy, and bibliographic citation is now officially a nightmare. With no single authority, punctuation, abbreviation and what-goes-in-what order is a jumbled mess. **NISO** is trying to unify standards, but it's bumping heads with **ISO** over library statistics. **NISO** wants to count them and **ISO** wants to measure them by the foot.

See — June Kronholz, "Bibliography Mess: The Internet Wreaks Havoc With the Form," *Wall Street Journal*, p.A1, May 2, 2002.

TEETERING GIANT by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Ziff Davis Media's auditors say the illness may very well be terminal. **Ziff Davis** magazines depend on technology advertising which is the hardest hit in the ad depression. It lost \$415.7 million over the nine months ending Dec. 31, '01. Ye-gads. Imagine being the CFO in charge of that.

See — "Ziff Davis Auditors Express Doubts On Its Survivability," *Wall Street Journal*, p. A6, May 2, 2002.